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ON PAGE 1

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Congress at Work

U.S. Spying: Partisanship Re-Emerges

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WASHINGTON—Seven years ago, in the wake of charges that U.S. intelligence agencies had engaged in assassination attempts and domestic spying, the United States became the world's first democracy to try to control secret spy activities through legislative committees.

The Senate and House intelligence committees created then are the only significant reform to have come from sensational congressional investigations that produced 200 formal findings and more than 40 proposals for change. All other major reform attempts have failed.

Across the political spectrum, from conservative Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) to liberal former Vice President Walter F. Mondale, the committees are given high grades for their performance in monitoring U.S. intelligence activities. But within the last year, partisanship has erupted and thrown a deep shadow over the future of the committees.

Consensus Breaks Down

The consensus on which the panels operated for six years—that intelligence oversight, much like intelligence activities themselves and the military services, should be above politics—broke down when the Democratic-controlled House Intelligence Committee voted along party lines to release a staff report critical of U.S. intelligence efforts in Nicaragua.

This "politicization of intelligence" has since been decried by conservatives, who see the House committee as having become "a weapon against this Administration" and fear that the same thing would occur in the Senate committee if it were not Republican-controlled. Some liberals, on the other hand, applaud it as a fair extension of party fights over foreign policy.

The immediate danger, according to Adm. Bobby R. Inman, the highly respected former deputy director of central intelligence who served in high posts in both Democratic and Republican administrations, "is that when (the committees) make decisions along party lines, they run a high risk of drawing a partisan reaction from the Administration in power."

Possible Retaliation Seen

Some Democrats believe that such a retaliation may have occurred this year with release of an FBI report suggesting that the Soviet secret police manipulate nuclear freeze advocates, among whom were most of the Democrats in the House.

Some Republicans, for their part, suggest that the Democrats resorted to partisanship after news leaks became ineffective as a congressional weapon for vetoing intelligence operations. In Nicaragua, for instance, U.S. funding and arming of anti-Sandinista guerrillas—"the most overt covert operation in history," as one intelligence official put it—has continued and even increased, despite news leaks about the operation. Leaks about similar aid to anti-Soviet Afghan rebels and anti-Libyan forces in Chad have not forced a curtailment in the operations.

The partisanship, which each

party accuses the other of starting, seems certain to continue on the issue of Central America. It also could spill over into two other controversial areas in which the Administration has recently acted:

—Paramilitary operations. The total number of covert, or secret, activities by the CIA has risen only marginally, to perhaps 15 compared to 10 or 12 in the last years of the Jimmy Carter Administration. "Covert activities per se are not controversial, but covert paramilitary operations are," one congressman said.

To the dismay of many Democrats, most of the new Reagan Administration covert activities have been paramilitary, involving the costly purchase of foreign arms and equipment to disguise the source. The Carter Administration put greater emphasis on secret programs to spread disinformation and to fund pro-American politicians in foreign countries, sources said.

—A new spy unit in the Defense Intelligence Agency. As proposed, it was to be in addition to the Army's new Intelligence Support Agency set up in this Administration to service the elite, anti-terrorist Strike Force Delta, sources said. Republicans and Democrats joined to oppose the new DIA unit, sources said, on the grounds that it would overlap with CIA human intelligence collection efforts and make control of such sensitive operations



Associated Press

Barry Goldwater

more difficult.

But the need for tactical, on-the-ground intelligence for the military services was starkly demonstrated last month in the Grenada invasion. That "intelligence failure" showed that the CIA, with its larger focus on foreign political, economic and strategic issues, often does not satisfy military needs. (The CIA also has tended to ignore Central America generally, closing its station in El Salvador two years before the rebellion began there in 1980.) Pentagon requests for its own clandestine collection service could be revived as a result.

Political conditions and public attitudes toward intelligence agencies have changed significantly since 1976 when Congress conducted investigations into intelligence abuses and the committees, headed by former Sen. Frank Church (D-Ida.) and former Rep. Otis Pike (D-N.Y.), called for drastic reforms.